

Pieces of Grace

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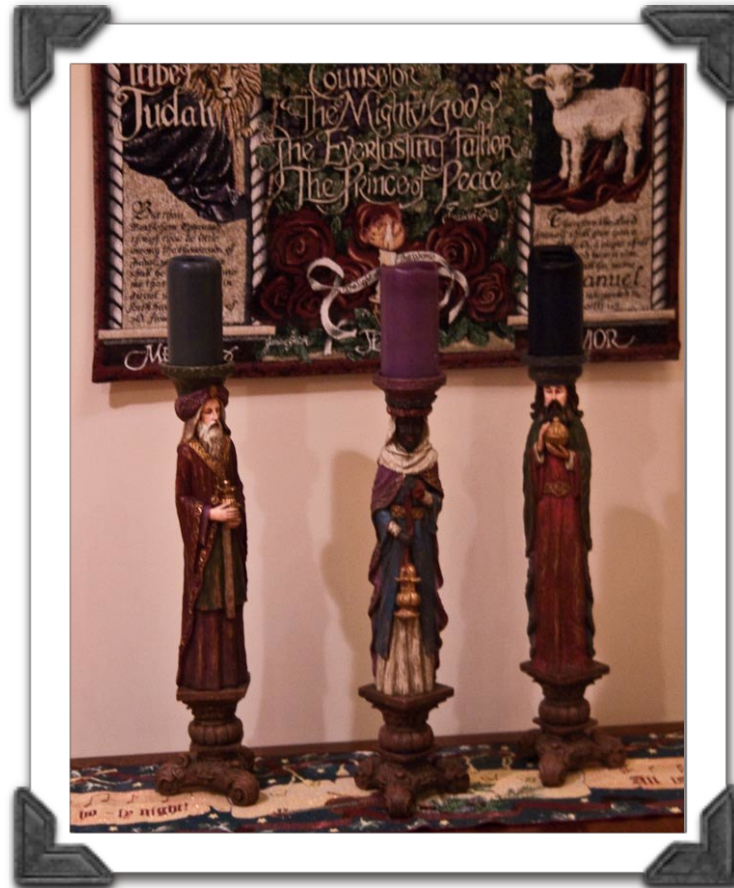
Catastrophe.

Three tall ceramic candle holders in the shape of the three wise men grace our entry way during advent and Christmas. Bought cheaply in a close-out sale, they're our personal favorites among all our Christmas decorations.

While we were putting them away, in the midst of our lively conversation, one of the wise men—the gentleman on the left—got knocked over and...well...his head got sheared off. Shock yielded to

horror, then tears, then self-recriminations. One moment, happy chatter, next, pained silence.

Though I'm no craftsman, I have something of a "fixer" gift. Not a gift I have cultivated as a true skill, just a kind of "knack," even an



enjoyment for collecting up all the pieces and seeing if, just maybe, they can be re-assembled.

So I packed all the shards into the "trauma room" (my crazy, jumbled up shop), and start studying the complex puzzle of beard fragments, a head, neck pieces...and a few miscellaneous flakes including the big flake holding the glue tube, who needed a little gathering and

repairing himself! Before long, I am looking once again at my favorite decoration. Yes, I can see a faint line where the join isn't perfect. You never get all the parts, and in some areas ceramic "powders off" leaving a gap that can't be filled. Still, I doubt anyone not knowing about the break would notice.

Which puts me in mind of things broken and fixed. For some people, once a precious, beloved thing is damaged, no repair will do. "Never the same" is their grieved refrain. The item will always be less. No matter how perfect the join, the hairline of the fracture will always be there, the first thing they see. Fixed, but imperfect nonetheless. The

unhealed break on the soul cannot see the repair, only the signs of the damage done.

Then there are people who love something *especially* for it's having been salvaged, spared of disposal and rejection. Not that I like breaking things! But in life, things break. More importantly, *we break things*. Accidents happen. A split-second of inattention, and whang! A personal treasure is in pieces. A hurtful word is spoken, now beyond retrieval, the wise-man's head goes rolling across the floor. A shadow of distrust falls across someone's face, suspicion shades their voice, a friendship contracts. We slip the car into reverse and touch the gas pedal...not seeing the car parked behind us. A word of affirmation we could have said, should have said, didn't say...a heart aches, hardly knowing why.

When things break, we either give up and walk away, hunting for a perfect replacement, or we can *cherish*. *Cherishing simply means we value something so much that, for us, it cannot be replaced, but must be repaired and restored, even at great cost.* We'd rather have it, repaired imperfectly, than be without.

We who get a special delight from repairing things experience an electric thrill from the moment we realize...*this can be restored*. Seeing how the broken pieces can be re-fit comes like a revelation. You sometimes see it all in a flash, but usually only after patient, gingerly testing. This piece has to be put in place before that one...this letter needs to be written...those two parts have to be glued before you place them in the whole...that phone call should be made..., this other piece will only fit from behind...being right is less important than making it right...don't stress the joint too soon...take the full measure of the loss...hold the pieces in place gently until the glue sets up...don't rush...you might need a bit of paint on the crack... don't ask for their forgiveness too soon...let the apology soak in... don't rush forgiveness, but don't delay penitence. A broken career, a cracked marriage, a wounded adult child, a chilled friendship...a

lonely spouse,...can be mended. At some point, with patient attention, the repair is complete. No, it's not "just like new." Fixed things, fixed people, will always be vulnerable, their imperfection an unassailable fact. But one thing trumps the imperfection of the repair: *we have not lost that which we valued.* We have cherished.

Even in heaven, Jesus bears the five wounds. No, the Eternal Son was never the same again, not even after the resurrection, not even after the ascension. Time and contingency intersects eternal Godhead in the nail-prints and wounded side of the eternal Son.

Irony: fixers end up loving the thing fixed more—at least, more *tenderly*—than when it was "perfect." I love that wise man. I held his hollow, ceramic head in my hands. The grief of seeing him broken energizes the relief

of seeing him whole again. The faint seam doesn't say "Broken! Never the same!" No, it says "Repaired! Redeemed! Cherished! Saved!"

Most of us are broken, many times over. I have so many hairline fractures where God has glued me back together my soul looks like a road map. Deep inside, I'm mainly glue, duct tape and



baling wire, applied by the sure hand of a Fixer who took an unusual delight in collecting all my shards and fragments, carefully fitting them all back together, and loving me more tenderly for it. Not lost. Found. Fixed. Cherished.

Can you imagine on the first day after the return of Jesus, God looking at his redeemed creation, a healed nature, restored humanity—what we will call “heaven”—and saying, “Well, it’ll never be the same...” No, God looks at his creation—made by his hands, shattered by our hands, re-broken again and again by our own folly and blindness—and he *cherishes the work of his hands*, hairline fractures, glue joints, baling wire and all.

The Bible has a word for this: *Redemption*.

Redemption transcends mere repair. Redemption, the thing itself, reaches farther than the lovely historical, cultural, familial metaphor taken up by the biblical writers as a sign to point to it. Redemption comprises more than grudgingly suspended punishment followed by icy probation. Redemption is heart-thawed, embracing welcome, jubilant that what was damaged was not finally lost.